

# Seniors Update 2019



## Dear Vermont Senior,

Older Vermonters regularly reach out to let me know how they're doing and it's clear that far too many are struggling. From the high cost of prescription drugs and basic needs, to social isolation and loneliness, seniors face many challenges.

In my view, no senior in the richest country in the world should ever have to struggle to afford basic necessities. At a time of massive inequality, it is absolutely unconscionable that some in Washington shower the richest with giveaways while cutting programs that so many seniors rely on. With 10,000 Americans turning 65 each day, we should be expanding – not cutting – programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security.

One important part of this support is the Older Americans Act (OAA), which funds essential programs that keep seniors healthy and well, like Meals on Wheels and senior centers. As Congress debates changes to the OAA, I am fighting for additional funding for this crucial law. I have also introduced legislation to make health care a human right through a single-payer, Medicare for All program with expanded benefits like vision, hearing, dental, and long-term care. Additionally, I introduced bills to bring down the cost of prescription drugs, expand Social Security, and increase funding to Community Health Centers.

A new study I commissioned from the Government Accountability Office confirms what we already knew – poverty is a death sentence. The poorest 20 percent of older Americans die early at twice the rate as the richest 20 percent. And while the top 20 percent of older households saw their wealth double over the past two decades, older households in the bottom 20 percent saw their assets plummet by an average of over \$9,000, landing them \$4,700 in debt. We must put an end to this obscene inequality so our nation's seniors can age with dignity.

A great nation should be judged not by the tax breaks it gives to the rich, but by how it cares for families, children, seniors, veterans, the poor, and the sick. And as the Ranking Member of the Senate Budget Committee, the Chairman of the Expand Social Security Caucus, and the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Retirement Security, I am proud to fight in Washington on behalf of older Vermonters.

**Let me take this opportunity to invite you to one of our senior holiday meals.** These events, held in December around the state, are great opportunities to connect with other seniors, enjoy holiday music and good food, and get updates from my office on what's happening in Washington. Please see the back page of this newsletter for dates, locations, and the number to call to RSVP. I hope you'll consider attending an event near you.

Please know that my office is always here to help. If you have problems with federal agencies or programs – including Social Security, Medicare, and veterans' benefits – do not hesitate to call my office at 1 (800) 339-9834. And for updates on what I'm working on, you can sign-up for my online newsletter, "The Bernie Buzz," by visiting my website at [www.sanders.senate.gov](http://www.sanders.senate.gov).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bernie".

**Bernie Sanders**  
United States Senator

# Seniors Update 2019

## We Need to Expand Social Security, Not Cut It

Social Security is the most successful antipoverty program in America. It helps more than 22,000 Vermonters with disabilities and over 9,600 children throughout the state. Without it, the poverty rate for Vermont seniors would skyrocket from 7 percent to 41 percent.

Despite Social Security's success, far too many seniors still struggle to make ends meet. I have proposed legislation to increase Social Security benefits and extend the program's solvency for 50 years by requiring the wealthiest Americans pay their fair share. It is absurd that a CEO making \$20 million a year pays the same amount into Social Security as someone making \$132,900 a year.

Under my proposal, 98.2 percent of American workers would not see their taxes go up at all while benefits would increase by about \$1,300 a year for all low-income seniors. This bill would also increase annual benefits by more accurately calculating the financial needs of seniors.

The good news is I'm not alone in this fight. I recently formed the Expand Social Security Caucus, which 20 Senators and over 200 House members have joined, making it one of the largest groups in Congress. Together, we are telling the billionaires that their wealth is not more powerful than the needs of struggling seniors and people with disabilities.

## Working to Make Prescription Drugs Affordable

Americans pay, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs, with deadly consequences. Since 2014, the cost of 60 drugs commonly taken by older Americans has more than doubled, and 20 of them have at least quadrupled in price.

It is no surprise that one in four seniors taking prescription drugs say they have difficulty affording their medication. They are skipping doses and

cutting pills in half. Meanwhile, our government allows pharmaceutical CEOs and corporate shareholders to rake in huge profits. The greed of the pharmaceutical industry is killing Americans.

That is why I have introduced three major pieces of legislation to lower prescription drug prices. The first is a bill that brings down prescription drug prices for seniors by allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices directly with pharmaceutical companies, as private insurance companies already do. My second bill allows Americans to import safe and less expensive medicines from Canada, an idea supported by 80 percent of Americans. Finally, I authored legislation to guarantee Americans pay no more for their prescription drugs than the median price paid in other industrialized countries, which experts estimate would cut most drug prices in half.

Congress must act now to stop the harm the pharmaceutical industry inflicts on our communities. I am proud to help lead this fight on behalf of Vermont seniors.



## New Research: Inequality Among Seniors

I commissioned a new Government Accountability Office study on life expectancy and inequality. It confirmed something I have been saying for many years: poverty is a death sentence. Fewer than half of the poorest Americans in their 50s and 60s in 1992 were alive two decades later. Among the richest seniors, three-quarters were still alive. This is shameful.

The report found that the poorest one-fifth of seniors got by on an average income of \$14,000 a year, while the wealth of the top 20 percent averaged \$4.6 million. We must put an end to the obscene inequality in our country and ensure living wages, quality health care, and retirement security for our seniors as human rights.



## Working to Enact Medicare for All

Much of the media coverage around Medicare for All has focused on who would be covered – everyone. Equally important is what would be covered. Today, 60 million people – including more than 145,000 Vermonters – rely on Medicare for their health care. While 75 percent of people covered by Medicare say the program is working well, it must be improved. Traditional Medicare does not cover routine dental, vision or hearing care, or out-of-pocket expenses like copayments and deductibles. Prescription drug costs remain astronomical. My Medicare for All Act would change all that.

My legislation, supported by over 60 national organizations and 14 other Senators, would immediately improve Medicare by covering dental, vision, hearing, home- and community-based long-term care services and eliminate all out-of-pocket costs. It would also improve coverage for other benefits, including prescription drugs, non-emergency medical transportation for low-income

seniors and primary care. By including this support at no cost, Vermont seniors will no longer need to spend their savings on supplemental insurance coverage, which currently helps cover these needs.

We must pass Medicare for All to finally guarantee health care as a right, not a privilege.



## Extending and Expanding the Older Americans Act

In the United States, over 7 million seniors live in poverty and nearly 9 million face food insecurity. Nearly 10,000 Vermont seniors do not know where their next meal will come from.

OAA programs currently serve one in three older Vermonters. Last year alone, OAA funded over 1 million meals, 100,000 rides, 3,600 hours of legal services, and support for 300 family caregivers throughout Vermont. These services are critical in the most rural parts of the state, where seniors may face isolation and loneliness or struggle to access transportation and healthy food.

Just as I did in 2016 when it was last passed into law, I am proud to be leading the effort to renew

and improve the OAA. Earlier this year, 39 of my Senate colleagues joined me in calling for a much-needed increase in funding for OAA programs.

We must continue funding the OAA's critical programs, but also expand the law to include options for seniors to receive healthy, medically tailored meals that can improve specific health conditions. Further, we must do more to assist volunteers who help provide services; include training for cultural competency to reduce bias based on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; and provide additional support for senior centers and area agencies on aging. Working together, we can and must reauthorize a stronger Older Americans Act.

## Protecting Community Health Centers

Community Health Centers (CHCs) provide medical, dental, mental health, and substance-abuse treatment, as well as low-cost prescription drugs to tens of millions of people across the country. In Vermont, nearly one in three seniors rely on CHCs for their health care. However, the legislation currently being debated in the Senate would kick 3.4 million people off their primary care by cutting more funding to CHCs. I recently co-led an effort with more than 80 other lawmakers to push Congress to

increase funds for CHCs by 10 percent a year, as my bill – the Community Health Center and Primary Care Workforce Expansion Act – proposes. One of the achievements I am most proud of in my Senate career was securing additional federal support for CHCs in 2009 to expand health care to 25 million Americans, including through 24 new health center sites in Vermont. We must protect and expand the comprehensive medical treatment that so many Vermont seniors depend on.

## Do You Need Help or Know Someone Who Does?

**My caseworkers can help you with these federal programs and benefits:**

- **Social Security**
- **Medicare**
- **Veterans’ issues**
- **Federal housing**
- **Postal Service**
- **Federal student loans**
- **Other federal agencies**

Please call my Burlington Office at 1 (800) 339-9834 for assistance.

**Area Agencies on Aging:** Help to connect seniors with services like home-delivered meals and transportation. They are home to the State Health Insurance Assistance Program, which can help you enroll in Medicare or change your plan. **Remember, Medicare Open Enrollment ends December 7.**

**Senior Centers:** Offer programs and services like congregate meals, book clubs, and Tai Chi classes, as well as blood pressure and foot care clinics. Vermont’s senior centers can help you stay healthy and engaged in your community!

**For information on AAAs, senior centers and other important resources, call the Vermont Senior HELPLINE toll-free at 800-642-5119.**

## Senator Sanders’ Senior Holiday Dinners – RSVP Today!



- Bennington:**  
December 6 at noon  
Saint Peter’s Episcopal Church
- St. Johnsbury:**  
December 6 at noon  
St. Johnsbury House
- Burlington:**  
December 8 at noon  
Hilton Burlington Lake Champlain
- Rutland:**  
December 12 at noon  
Godnick Adult Center
- Barre:**  
December 13 at noon  
Canadian Club
- Brattleboro:**  
December 19 at noon  
Brattleboro Senior Center

RSVPs Required. Please call 1 (800) 339-9834 to reserve your spot.